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Owen Rye: An Interview by Tony Martin

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A photograph of an elderly man with a long white beard and hair, wearing a dark blue zip-up jacket. He is holding a large, rounded ceramic vessel with both hands. The vessel has a mottled appearance with shades of blue, green, and reddish-brown. He is looking down at the vessel with a focused expression. The background is dark and out of focus, showing some wooden structures and a pile of logs or branches.

Owen Rye

An Interview by Tony Martin



IT WAS WAR BETWEEN THE 16 YEAR OLD BOY AND HIS HIGH school chemistry teacher. The teacher was determined and the boy confrontational and spirited. Classes descended into conflict and anarchy.

Eventually, in a bid to break the deadlock, the boy approached his teacher with a bizarre proposal. "I will sit in the back of your classroom; I will not do any class work and will not listen to anything you say. I will study the subject myself and I will get an A in the final exams. In return you will leave me the f*ck alone."

The student was true to his word. Peace returned to the classroom. He studied hard, eager to prove a point and by the time he had achieved his 'A' he had developed a fascination with chemistry. By the age of 20 he completed a Bachelor of Science degree with first-class honours, falling in love with both the art and science of ceramics in the process. At 25 he completed a PhD, one of the youngest persons ever to have achieved such an award in Australia at that time. Within another two years he was a Post Doctoral Research Fellow with the Smithsonian Institution, Washington. Welcome to the brilliant, uncompromising and determined world of Owen Rye.

Rye's studio is a wonderful setting for our interview. The old, single-room, country schoolhouse had originally faced the main road, along which an 'Avenue of Remembrance' from the Great War had been planted – a grove of trees preserving the memories of marching bands, carefree country boys in search of adventure and the sons and fathers who never came home. The road has long since been rerouted to a more convenient location and the

school closed. All that remains are the giant trees leaning watchfully over what is now Rye's studio and kilns sheds.

I should not have expected the interview about his favourite pot to be easy. After all someone who has spent more than 50 years as an avid woodfirer probably does not consider 'easy' as important. Rye sat on a tall stool in front of an old workbench on which he had placed three uniquely different pieces of pottery, one of which, through a process of discussion and elimination, was going to be revealed as his favourite. The first was large, dark and brooding – inspired by a pot recovered from a mysterious Japanese shipwreck discovered off the local coast. The next, tall, elegant, voluptuous – a form that Rye has returned to again and again. The final pot, smaller, rough-hewn, bearing the scars of four days in the hell fires of an anagama kiln.

Rye turns his attention to exhibit number one. "I like the quality of it – it just kind of sits there, immobile, a finished kind of object. I like the dark. There is always. . . mystery in the darkness."¹ His attention moves on to the second piece. It is tall and curvaceous, glazed in a soft, grey gloss, with the faintest references to its woodfired origins. His fingers trace its organic, familiar curves. "It is crisp, these lines are nice and clear. I can only fit two in a firing and I only do one firing per year so you can do the math – and half of them don't work."² He chuckles.

He recalls fondly a similar piece he had made years before. It was exhibited in Melbourne and purchased by Ken Lawrence, a renowned collector of ceramics. "You have bought a lot of ceramics. . .



why did you buy this particular piece?"³ Rye asked. Lawrence just smiled. "Because I couldn't live another minute without it."⁴ "It's the nicest thing anyone has ever said about my work." A week later Ken Lawrence died. "But he had it for a week"⁵ remembers Rye, still quietly pleased with the gift given and received, however briefly.

He pauses, quiet for a moment, glancing around the old classroom, now studio, filled with the odd, the eccentric and the curious. His gaze wanders through the dusty windows, taking in the kiln sheds with their orderly stacks of split timber and the gigantic trees just beyond. When he starts speaking again his rough, guttural voice seems to have softened momentarily. "Where did it come from?" he asks, almost of himself.

A little hesitantly Rye begins telling of growing up hard in the remote Snowy Mountains region of New South Wales, Australia. The family home was isolated and extremely basic – without electricity or any modern conveniences. Winters were bitterly cold; the roads were sometimes impassable because of snow. He talks of icy winter evenings when the family would gather in close around the blazing log fire, of fondly remembered family meals simmering on the wood stove. Even hot water for bathing required lighting the water heater, again fuelled by wood. It left an indelible impression that "everything is freezing cold outside but it's nice and warm in here because of the wood fire. There is something comforting about a wood fire."⁶ Even gathering the wood became a proud rite of passage. When he was old enough Rye was allowed to accompany his father into the surrounding forest to collect wood for the upcoming winter months. "I just liked going out with my father to do that, it was something we did together. . . it is a very, very strong emotional pull."⁷

Rye finally reveals the third piece as his favourite. It is the simplest of forms, a plain canvas that has been brought to life by time spent in the fires of the anagama kiln. The surface is scarred and rough, almost primeval, highlighted by flashes of colour, encrusted by the buildup of ash and the imprint of supporting shells. Like Rye himself, it has an uncompromising, almost



defiant presence, challenging the viewer, offering no easy understandings. This piece makes no pretence of functionality, demands your attention and challenges you to wrestle with its complexity and ambiguities.

Ask Rye, however, why he has chosen this particular piece out of the many thousands he has made and the answer will surprise. "I'm more interested in what comes next rather than. . . in the past. I enjoy it because of what it is and I value it because of what I can learn from it."⁸ This sense of enquiry and of curiosity is a driving force in Rye's creative journey. "Looking at your work and not seeing it as a finished thing but seeing it as a guide to where to go next"⁹ is an underpinning philosophy. "I ask two simple questions. First, what complexity of emotions arises from my interaction with this object?"¹⁰ The second question is: what do I learn from this object? What insight do I have that I did not have before. . . where does it lead me, what might I make after experiencing this one?"¹¹

These revealing reflections are a timely reminder of the complex, multilayered nature of this snowy haired, gravelly voiced, woodfire potter from country Victoria. For not only is Rye a respected ceramics artist, credited with many more than one hundred national and international solo and group exhibitions, he is also a scientist (with a PhD in ceramics chemistry), prolific author, archaeologist, researcher, long-time academic and widely-published anthropologist.¹²

Yet, for all these achievements, he has chosen woodfiring – the most quixotic of ceramic processes – as his artistic voice, relishing its vagaries and uncertainties, embracing its unknown. "My woodfired pots are not designed, but imagined as a possibility; with the



knowledge that the eventual reality will be different. Perhaps better, perhaps worse but always different. The woodfired pot. . . with its distortions and flaws. . . reminds us of a different attitude, a different approach where logic is balanced by deviations in the plan, by accident along the way, by a sensory response rather than an intellectual one."¹³

There is another recurring theme throughout our interview: the friendships formed through a lifetime involvement in fire and clay. "I have made good friends by getting involved in this and if, for some reason, I had to stop making work tomorrow, it wouldn't matter so as long as I have still got all the friends. . . that's the most important thing."¹⁴ Janet Mansfield once observed that Rye was particularly drawn to woodfiring because of the camaraderie it offered.¹⁵ Coincidentally the evening before our interview, Rye and his partner Barbara (to whom he credits much of his success) had discussed, with palpable excitement, the upcoming firing of the anagama kiln. It is a much-anticipated annual event bringing together a sizable team of friends and family. Four days of hot, exhausting work, good food and long evenings of memories and laughter culminate in that most magic of moments when the great fire-breathing monster reveals its treasures as well as its inevitable questions.

For this remarkable potter the circle is now complete.

A lifetime on, the crackle of burning wood, the waft of smoke and the heat of the flames once again bring together everything that is truly valued in the life of Owen Rye.

ENDNOTES

1. Owen Rye. Recorded Interview. 21 June 2013.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Owen Rye. Aesthetics Panel. International Woodfire Conference, Flagstaff, Arizona, October 2006.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Gail Nichols. "Reconnaissance: New work by Owen Rye". Accessed 18 September, 2013, <http://www.owenrye.com/about/essay.html>.
13. Owen Rye. Artist statement, Freeland Gallery exhibition. September 2007. Exhibition catalogue. Email correspondence, 2 October, 2013.
14. Owen Rye. Recorded Interview. 21 June 2013.
15. Janet Mansfield. Recorded Interview. 26 October 2012.

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All photos by Jared, Tyler and Anne Martin.